

VZCZCXYZ0002
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #3485/01 3432234
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 092234Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7650
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3541
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3679
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 2317
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003485

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014

TAGS: [KN](#) [KS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#)

SUBJECT: LEE MYUNG-BAK STRETCHES HIS LEAD: KEY CONTACTS SAY
"GAME OVER"

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 7 poloffs met with several key Assembly contacts to gauge the mood in the National Assembly one day after the first televised presidential debate. All interlocutors from both the GNP and UNDP agreed that the "game was over" and Grand National Party (GNP) candidate Lee Myung-bak would win December 19; since being cleared of suspicion related to the BBK stock manipulation scandal, his lead has grown to 25 percent over his closest competitor. Since the April 2008 National Assembly elections are so soon after the presidential elections, despite conceding defeat, all parties remain engaged since their actions in December will affect their personal fates in April. End Summary

Road Ahead for Chung Dong-young

¶2. (C) Chief of Staff Kim Ki-bong, aide to key United New Democratic Party (UNDP) candidate Chung Dong-young's spokesperson Choi Jae-cheon, told poloffs that Chung would do his best, but admitted that with Lee Myung-bak cleared of charges related to BBK and all efforts to unify the liberal candidates failing, there were "no more cards left" in Chung's hand. Looking ahead to the National Assembly elections in the case that Chung loses in December, Kim said that the UNDP, while made up of various factions, would not split because that would lead to a disastrous loss in April. Instead, the most likely scenario would be for the UNDP to remain intact with a group leadership structure.

¶3. (C) Mr. Kim, a close Embassy contact, explained that Chung Dong-young would have to step down after a loss and could not play a leadership role. However, Chung could become a proportional representative to keep "his hat in the ring." Former Gyeonggi Governor Sohn Hak-kyu had the best chance to lead the party since he had no position in the Roh government. Moon Kuk-hyun, who might not unite with Chung due to his dogged belief he could still be the single liberal candidate, could also play an important role in the UNDP leadership heading into the April elections, Kim said.

¶4. (C) The National Assembly elections are April 9, just 45 days after the inauguration and, while the incoming president, still in the honeymoon period, would likely exert great influence on the elections, there could be a desire by voters to check Lee Myung-bak's power by voting for UNDP lawmakers. That, Kim explained, coupled with a possible low

turnout by conservatives who might think victory was assured, could lead to a positive result for the UNDP in April. The theme Chung and the UNDP would emphasize was that a Lee Myung-bak presidency and a GNP-led Assembly would mean a return to the days of authoritarianism.

Bad Luck to Talk About December 20

¶4. (C) Jang Young-il, chief of staff to key Lee Myung-bak aide lawmaker Kim Hak-song and a reliable contact, told poloff that everyone in the GNP was making an effort not to discuss anything past election day. Admitting that there were rumors that the Lee team had already formed its cabinet, another GNP advisor told poloff that such a list did not exist -- if it did it could lead to those not on the list to lose motivation. GNP Lawmaker Lee Hee-hoon told poloff that she believed the Lee team had already chosen its cabinet and that no one loyal to Park Geun-hye was on the list.

¶5. (C) While Park Geun-hye continues to say the right things and appear publicly at rallies to support Lee, some loyal to her feel the struggle within the GNP did not end when Park conceded the candidacy to Lee Myung-bak August 20, but that it continues now. Park loyalist lawmaker Song Young-sun told poloff December 7 that more information would come out and damage Lee Myung-bak before the election, despite the Prosecutor's announcement that Lee was not involved in the BBK scandal. Key Park supporter lawmaker Park Jong-keun told poloff that he was working hard to keep Park supporters from leaving to support Lee Hoi-chang in the GNP stronghold of Daegu, where he is in charge of the Lee campaign. He admitted this was a tall order, but he would succeed in keeping support behind Lee Myung-bak.

¶6. (C) When asked if Park Geun-hye would appear in public together with candidate Lee, Lee Hee-hoon said that Lee would not since he knew Park would draw a better crowd. In the April by-elections, at two rallies held at the same location just hours apart, after Park drew 1,000 supporters and Lee drew 50, Lee said that Lee Myung-bak was furious and vowed he would not appear at a joint rally with Park. Lee insinuated that the GNP would split in January because the Lee camp would be unwilling to split nominations fairly between Lee and Park supporters.

Comment

¶7. (C) With Lee's poll numbers climbing each day after being cleared of all suspicion in the BBK scandal, the GNP candidate is all but untouchable. The structured format of the three televised debates with very little open debate and six candidates is such that it will be hard for Lee to stumble. With 24 percent of Koreans watching the December 6 debate and similar numbers expected for the December 11 and 16 debates, the smooth-talking former news anchor Chung Dong-young, could make some inroads were Lee to misspeak (a likely outcome in an unscripted format) but as is, the debates should not be a factor.

¶8. (C) Talk in the Assembly focuses on the incoming administration -- who will head the transition team, who will take which ministry -- and the April National Assembly elections. With most Koreans growing more disinterested in the presidential election each day and Lee maintaining his gigantic lead, the public holiday on December 19 will likely be spent by many on the slopes rather than in the voting booth and it is likely that this election will see the lowest turnout for a presidential election yet.

VERSHBOW